



GABRIËL FAGAN'S 90TH BIRTHDAY EXHIBITION

On 4 November 2015, I opened Gabriël (Gawie) Fagan's 90th birthday exhibition¹ at the CifA offices. It was a tribute to his architectural production and time as a seminal SA architect.

By: Dr Arthur Barker, senior lecturer at the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria

This long-awaited and, I think, highly necessary exhibition of Fagan's architectural production encapsulates almost 60 years of work; a range of building typologies, contexts and scales. Fagan is, according to my calculations, the most lauded South African architect to date, having been awarded not only a Gold Medal from the South African Institute of Architects (SAIA), but also 16 other SAIA Awards and an Honorary Fellowship from the American Institute of Architects. Added to these accolades, he's received two honorary doctorates (from the University of the Free State and the University of Stellenbosch) and his conservation work has been equally lauded through Gold medals from the National Monuments Council and the South African Academy of Arts and Science. Fagan was the third Sophia Gray Laureate at the University of the Free State, back in 1991.

THE MAN

But the awards extend beyond architecture and demonstrate the attributes of the polymath that is Fagan. In 1982, he won the Cape to Rio yacht race, receiving a President's Award for the achievement. It is surely this innate ability to understand context, in all its forms, that has its roots in Fagan's birthplace in Newlands, Cape Town in 1925. Here, his contextual appreciations were initiated by sailing a makeshift corrugated-iron boat down the Liesbeek River and digging bunkers in his mother's prized rose garden.

A four-year stint during which he studied engineering at the University of Cape Town honed these skills, assisted by part-time pursuits such as the rebuilding of motorcycles, which, by selling them on, he was eventually able to afford an Adler car. Maidens, music and flying were other distractions, which led him to

his wife Gwen. She remains, to this day, his right-hand 'man' and an integral part of Gabriël Fagan Architects.

Fagan's architectural education, in fact, only began in 1946, at the University of Pretoria (UP), where the abovementioned hobbies made way for a more serious pursuit – that of the study of Architecture.

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THE CONTEXT

Fagan was educated at an important juncture in South Africa's architectural history. The Martienssen Modern Movement influence of the Witwatersrand School of Architecture was waning, after the architectural fraternity realised that aspects of it were not appropriate for the SA climate. Fagan followed a 'regional-modern' architectural education and, through the influences of part- and full-time lecturers, such as Helmut Stauch, Norman Eaton and Basil South at UP, developed an appreciation of place and began a search for a locally appropriate architecture.

CONTRIBUTION

The exhibition and larger body of built work represent several important facets in Fagan's search for architecture of place – where, I believe, history is made contemporary. >

¹Fagan's 90th birthday was on 25 November 2015.

¹ Fagan and one of his many motorcycles at his Newlands home around 1945 (Fagan archive, undated).



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This has happened on a scale of architectural approaches that range from conservative ideas of preservation... to more radical ideas in the guise of conservation. Fagan has made enormous contributions at an urban scale, such as the preservation of towns like Tulbagh and the development of the Cape Town waterfront precinct in the late 1970s, together with Dave Jack *et al.*

Fagan appreciates the traditive nature of architecture by understanding historical legacy, reinterpreting it and then synthesising it with modern ways of living. His domestic architecture is a unique synthesis of the principles of the Cape vernacular style and Modern Movement attitudes to function and space-making which, in their new form(s), create a unique architectural language. The result of this I call a relationship between Familiarity and Strangeness, which is exhibited through formally reinterpreted architectural elements such as chimneys, walls and roofs.

But there is a fine balance between approaches of the cerebral and the physical. Fagan remarked in 1982 that 'a child can only fully develop if hand and mind are

taught to work in synergy'. *Die Es* was entirely constructed by the Fagan family, with Fagan having learnt much from the construction of Cape vernacular buildings. However, the foundations for a hands-on approach were established in childhood and at university.

These practical approaches are finely balanced with haptic aspects of design, which allow the visitor or inhabitant to experience space with all of their architectural

approaches. Through aural, visual, tactile and physical means, the architect imbues each space with a different, but appropriate, spatial quality while subtly guiding the

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inhabitants to make a decision about further movement. The most developed of these [senses] can be found in *Die Es* which, Peter Buchanan, a previous editor of the *Architectural Review* and a one-time employee of Fagan's, called 'one of the best buildings of the 20th century'. It certainly exemplifies all the ideas I have alluded to, none of which, unfortunately, come close to explaining that which should be at the core of our business – namely the design of space and place!

CONCLUSION

My understanding of Fagan's *oeuvre* is, of course, contestable and, unfortunately for me, reinforced by his responses to my many questions over the years: 'Ja, maar Arthur, ek het nie noodwendig so daaraan gedink nie.' Most important is what he said, in 1983, at a Cape Town conference on regionalism: 'Architects should be striving for an architectural language that "belongs and is appropriate to the Cape"'. This lesson – and other wonderful poetic, theoretical and pragmatic lessons – from this Architectural Great are things we should all take to heart.

Fagan has produced an architectural body of work that has been nationally and internationally lauded, that is architecturally unique and, at the same time, locally appropriate. His 90th Birthday Exhibition was a fitting opportunity for others to experience his contributions to our environment and to thank Fagan for inspiring us to be better, and more critical, architects. ■

2 General view of the Fagan exhibition in the offices of Cifa (Arthur Barker, Nov 2015).

3 Model of Fagan's first-year design project (Fagan archive). 4 Model of Fagan's controversial Mike Sports development near the 18th-century Lutheran Church in Strand Street, Cape Town (Arthur Barker, Nov 2015).